

The Prince's Mantle: Origins

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Part One: Great Barbarism

Prologue – The Mantle

From a distance it was beautiful, like a shining beacon of tranquillity and hope. Its lighted ambience caressed the long thin bridge upon which it sat, in expectation. Its brilliance showered the dark empty depths beneath the bridge, suffusing the area with purity.

It had never seen the like before, but didn't ponder on these differences much. It did not have the capacity for many thoughts, only feelings and instincts in response to forces and situations. In itself, it was new, like its soon-to-be host. Motivated by a duty that flowed outward, its reach could stretch outward except through walls, which blocked its path as it manoeuvred and observed the egg. In a sense, it was shapeless, and slipped inside and outside of reality. It emitted a noise which resounded inside – a harsh noise of disorientation.

It wanted to touch the egg, and poke it, just to collect and store the sensation. It looked real, warm, and vibrant. Completely unlike the miserable void of its own closed sensory void of an existence. It moved forward, knowing its mission was to ensnare, but on whose behalf it could not think. There was no way it could contradict, defeat, or harm itself. Indeed, in its silent voyage through coloured spaces and shapes, it had tried to question and contradict itself, looking inward to discern some truth that could not be found. Nor would it ever be found by itself. The same conclusion it kept coming to was always forgotten: it was incomplete and couldn't grow and evolve.

Was it desire that drove it towards the egg? It was a need to touch, hold, and manipulate life for its own purposes. It had been left out for such a long time, observing a beautiful environment that interacted, without understanding its own place in it. And yet, in another way, it felt as if its existence was widespread – gaping holes in the fabric of reality simply apart and destined never to connect with life. This purpose that drove it, however, compelled it to seek out this particular egg.

It could not reach out and ensnare it yet ... the egg wasn't ready.

The bright rounded egg began to pulse with a soft light that contrasted with the shadowy few brownish splotches pressed against its shell. As it glowed with warmth, it altered colour, changing from a pinkish-white, to a blood-red, and then to indigo. The glowing lime-green mucus membrane of its surface stretched gently, and then became more forceful.

It bobbed up and down in anticipation, feeling as heavy as a solid and as light as air at the same time. The rules up-and-down simply did not apply.

There were mild tremors close to the bottom of the egg. Then there was suddenly a "plop" noise. Out came a limb, darkly indigo and hairy, with ivory claws at the end. The long pointed claws ripped the wall of the lime-green mucus egg shell apart. These were claws with a purpose. The hand-shaped purple protrusion reached out far. It rotated a few times, and then grasped at the cool atmosphere outside.

It homed in on entity, circling and becoming close to the heartbeat of the being. As soon as it did, it realised something was irregular. The being was supposed to be purple, but its soul was flawed. There was a darkened patch of disruption; a shade of irregularity that did not comply with whatever instructions it felt it had been given. Its mission to ensnare was questioned by itself, and caused it to pause in its circling movements towards the being. The being was as flawed as it was, but the significance of this could not be taken into consideration to motivate action that deviated from the instructions it had been given. The pause ended, but it had at least collected information that was vital to it ... and whoever had given it instructions.

Coughing and spluttering with all the mucus spread over his exterior, he hatched.

The thick black birth hairs on his arms and chest began to recede, fading into the tough purplish skin of his young and supple body. He had toned muscles all over, coating his body with bulk. He was now standing erect, and looking down at himself he regarded his impressive physical stature with pride.

His sharp teeth cut into his lip, his nose felt chunky, and his jaw was heavy like a jutting cliff. It was as if ages of physical change had occurred. He stretched his wide shoulders and broad chest a few times, and roared loudly to express his might.

The stars twinkled invitingly. It was ... night-time. He knew this, just as he knew the parts of his body and ... his name! As the mucus inside his head dissipated, everything was more clear and logical. Step by step, the rules of his being became apparent. Then he remembered that there were objects, like the stars, that existed outside of his being. He wondered if he could control the rules of external objects, but something inside him, an instinct, told him he could not. He felt crestfallen that his reach was limited. He saw himself as a being of fading lines that connected with the environment, working in tandem with a purpose that he couldn't yet fathom.

Inside him was a void of his own control, and these straight lines were pulled taut, restraining him, fixing him, and orienting him. They were thin and purple; the same colour as his body. Outside of his inner self was a world of noise and activity, or so he presumed because he could not understand exactly what the rules were or how he was going to make sense of them with reference to his self.

Marcellus, is that my name? What could it mean? 'My cell' – am I prisoner of an external system? Is 'Mar' in reference to a 'marred existence'? I don't feel flawed. I feel curious, new, strong, and optimistic. What 'us' could possibly have relevance to me? Marcellus considered these words and their meanings and many more. One word interested him and absorbed him with its relevance, but it took time to rise to his perception. He thought the concept over a few times. The juices inside his brain had still not receded.

Opportunity!

Memories of changing times sped by in his mind's eye. Vicious strange monsters grasped the engine of change and propelled it forward by throwing a multitude of ships at hundreds and hundreds of spheres. They grew in splendour and might, centralising their power and giving rise to new life forms and structures.

Galaxies moved and stars realigned, through time. A division in space occurred, disrupting the monsters' conquest, and dark holes emerged manipulated by unseen masters. From this abyss came floating presences, unable to communicate, based as they were on raw skinless pieces of matter. These were not life-forms but entities of horror.

And then ... his own existence as he blinked and took in his surroundings. He had come from nowhere, it seemed. An egg with cracked shell pieces was even now evaporating mysteriously in the natural air. He thought he could feel the eyes of another presence on the rooftop of the building, but he was too wrapped up in his speculations to bother looking at who, or what, observed him. It could have been a look of wonder he thought came from the observer he could only make out at the corner of his eyes.

Returning to his thoughts, he knew he had been born from the same matter created by the vicious strange monsters, whatever he believed himself to have seen or experienced before his birth. The truth confused him.

Opportunity! Life is opportunity, but to do what?

He felt complete, and yet had no idea what to do, as if his birth had been a mistake and that he didn't belong in a place of other objects, which may or may not have been complete.

His feet rested upon a long thin bridge, connecting two tall floating grey buildings; floating because of the black chasm that existed below. All of the grey tubular buildings he could see in the distance floated side-by-side. It was how things appeared, he concluded, as he identified more of his surroundings.

There was now a faint peach colour marking the horizon, which reminded him that he had been standing stationary for a long time. His observations and internal reasoning made him comfortable, and so he was reluctant to take that first step. Besides, which direction would he go? What would happen if he went forward, to the building that was closer, instead of walking back across the bridge that he hadn't even walked across? It didn't make sense, but he felt he had to move forward; instinct told him he would find answers by confronting the prominent building, standing over him like a sturdy wide grey fortress that wrapped around the walkways as if hugging them in protection.

Gnawing at his lip, his mind was crippled by indecision. Just as he was about to take a step forward and take a risk, a flicker at the corner of his eyes made him snap his gaze to the right, and then the left. He was acutely aware of some presence close to him, maybe behind him, that he

couldn't see. Most of the sky was still quite dark, but he knew he wouldn't even have seen this presence during the day. It was a phantom creeping up on him, and yet despite his fears he would not look back to see it for what it truly was. He dared not because it had got him and he knew it had him within its sights. His back felt slender, vulnerable, and bony in response to the thing, which made him shudder.

Whatever was going to happen next was not something he wanted, and at this point he realised how important it was that he have control over the destiny of his own body; strength to fight off purposes that meant him harm or which desired to bend his being to another purpose contrary to his independence. But he had lost this fight. He could only hope to be born anew with a resistance to fight back at a later time, after what had as good as already occurred.

A cool silky sensation slid down his back, and Marcellus spun in fright. It was happening and there was nothing he could do about it. A terrible fate was being thrust upon him; a fate he did not determine. It caressed him at first, with a light touch that he immediately despised. There had been no evil before this day, or none that he had experienced before.

The presence now clung to him, enveloping him from behind and cutting off his physical resistance. Just as he was about to retaliate with arms, it was too late, and the presence seemed to sooth him with a feeling he could not understand nor resist. All capacity faded in this confusion, and he was shocked by the impact, which had arrived with such finality. He stood, perplexed, like a statue on the thin bridge, and unaware of anything around him.

His mind had been disconnected from something, as if wrenched by ruthless force, and he would never be connected again. Loss spread through him, of having being removed from something precious, but he could not identify what he had lost, if indeed he had. Perhaps it was the presence that made him feel this way.

It became a part of him, and settled as if it had always been resting in the back of his mind. Resting, or slumbering heedless of the motivation, activity, and *opportunity* of its host. It had inhibited him from seeing and exploring the building ahead, injecting him with hopelessness and a lack of incentive to connect again. Why connect again with the outside world when his connection could be so easily wrenched away and cause hurt? All this Marcellus could already sense with his accelerated birth.

The black presence came within his view, or was it a shadowy and dark presence? It was more than just a flicker distorting reality at the periphery of his vision. It was now a real danger; a dagger in the pre-dawn night and a thief of incentive and opportunity. With his own eyes he beheld the horrifying reality of its intrusion, and the stripping away of all pleasant sensations. The presence, the Mantle, clasped together around his neck. When he tugged at the clasp to remove it, he found it was like an unbreakable metal.

He thrashed viciously, choked and oppressed by this alien object. It throttled him, and he moaned like an animal, calling for help. Still the silky skin of blackness pushed inwards and around him, cutting off the beauty of the dawn in its mutating immensity

It hurtled him backwards. Onto his back, he threw repeated punches into the black fabric but it did no good, and he gasped with exertion. The fight left him and he lay supine, resting in a black cocoon, with mental oblivion crashing down upon his consciousness.

Chapter One – Warlord Aerol

He awoke, blinking slowly, to see the sun shine powerfully through the layers of swirling grey mist in the sky above. It was the first time he had slept, and it had felt like a blanket of relief, from overload. A series of startling events abruptly crashed through his mind at an alarming rate – nightmares?

Marcellus sat up, feeling the harsh surface of the grey mottled bridge intrude upon the skin of his back. The texture was unpleasant, and too intense. Sounds came to his ears in a rush of urgency. Stinks from beneath the bridge wafted up to his nose, causing him to sneeze and wave them away in disgust. The bridge and the buildings appeared with clarity in the sun, as if welcoming, and intrusive. Was it day that brought such vivid sensations? He rubbed his head. It took a moment before he considered that maybe his nightmares had been the day before.

Did I hatch from an egg? What was that nightmare that assailed me?

He jolted at the creepy silken sensation at his back; and leapt upwards, staring behind at the long black cloak, which swept by his ankles, and was fastened to his neck by a clasp. It could not be removed with his primitive hands; it was unbreakable, just like the one in the nightmare. Every time he turned the Mantle was there, billowing outward, in the form of an ethereal shadow-coat. When he twisted his head to look at its surface area, he reckoned he could see glitter and small stars that indicated its depth. When he touched it, it rippled outward, and changed its pattern of stars and nebulas. He recoiled from touching it because it felt harsh and dry, just like the surface of the bridge, but it did make him wonder if the Mantle was the cause of these sensations because he suspected it would be horrible, torture even, to touch it repeatedly. The edges of the Mantle, in contrast, were pitch-black.

It took time for Marcellus to realise that he could hear voices, noises with intent, and even see purplish beings who appeared as he must have, moving on the rooftops of the prominent wide grey fortress ahead. They were patrolling, and some were looking at and pointing towards him while engaging in discussion, but despite their hostile glares they were thankfully not moving towards him. Marcellus felt unprepared. He didn't know how to act or what to say to them, but decided he had to do something because he could not remain on the bridge indefinitely.

He walked towards the arched entrance of the fortress standing a few feet above his head, beneath which were a double-doors fastened closed between two round knobs by a shiny golden chain. His coordination was a bit rusty but he managed to pull the chain from its attachment and push open the heavy resisting door. His other hand struggled to rip off the clasp that bound him.

It appeared that he was standing in a lobby that was bustling with creatures that looked as he assumed he must to them. Around him, there were slender females standing behind desks with easy smiles on their faces, and large muscle-bound brutish guards positioned around the circumference, with implacable expressions painted on the sculpted musculature of their faces. The contrast between the two types of creatures was confusing to him at first, before he realised how much shorter and slimmer he was than the guards, despite having their body hair.

Am I a third type?

He glanced at the females first, and their smiles elicited a pleasant uplifting sensation in his heart, before it was momentarily cut off by the dangerous glare of a nearby guard. As with the other guards, he proudly hefted a large pole-axe, and while Marcellus' eyes were meeting his, he looked like he was going to move the weapon into an attacking stance if eye contact was maintained for a moment longer; and so Marcellus shrunk away from the bad emanating aura of intimidation, which he could somehow sense, because he didn't know how to react safely..

As he proceeded further into the lobby he realised that he felt quite exposed. Groups of these purple creatures started to point or gesture to their friends.

Marcellus felt like he stood out.

Powerful and aggressive guards closed-in on his position, hefting great silver pole-axes and bearing armour that resembled silver exo-skeletons, which hid the hues of their skin behind the bright reflective flashes that rebounded from them.

There was a dozen of them, surrounding him and muttering curses. Their slow and ponderous gasping breaths were marked by their large chests repeatedly pushing the armour up and down.

Marcellus was much shorter than these Guards.

Why do these Guards wear exo-skeleton armour?

Marcellus scanned the lobby for the explanation. He noticed that the general populace was scurrying out of the exits, as if aware that something dangerous or violent was afoot. The slender female receptionists were escorted out of the spacious lobby discreetly, leaving the place empty.

‘Take that cloak off!’ one of the brutes barked, before Marcellus was able to ask why he was being accosted.

‘Why?’ Marcellus challenged back boldly, his back upright.

The closest brute stepped forward and slashed downwards in a heavy arc. Marcellus stepped to the side easily enough, just avoiding the vibrating hum of the axe.

The attacker paused, as if at a loss because he had missed. The others narrowed their eyes, and their perverted breathing increased in tempo.

‘Take the cloak off now!’ a slightly taller and more commanding guard ordered with an imperious finger pointed at the clasp.

Marcellus considered taking the cloak off, to avoid further confrontation. His hands grappled with the clasp, but it was futile; it was too hard and solid, and the black cloak seemed to be magically bonded with it.

His struggle continued for a few moments, while the guards watched quietly.

‘I can’t,’ Marcellus breathed in frustration, giving up and letting his hands fall to his sides.

‘Take him!’ the commanding guard ordered.

They converged forward. Marcellus felt threatened, and didn’t want to be handled against his will. He prepared to defend himself, and shifted on his feet, somehow evading the first oncoming assailant. The space he gained gave him relief that he had acted against the attack in a correct way, but it was short-lived.

The remainder crossed the floor in swift large strides, their pole-axes crashing down upon his space, with thunderous echoes. Marcellus stopped the progress of a pole-axe by grabbing for its handle and using what meagre force he had to try and wrestle it away, but the guard was too strong and there was no muscle behind his intent. Marcellus’ hands were roughly thrown off the handle, causing the bones in his arms and hands to rattle and then ache.

Marcellus lost his balance, tripped, and landed onto his back against the floor. Pain shot up his spine in waves, and somewhere in his mind was the realisation that he had lost precious time in this assault.

A pole-axe smashed the floor beside his head, causing splinters to avalanche a few inches to his left. Marcellus rolled forward in a jumble, and was back on his feet. He used his thumb to attack the eye of a guard, using any means at his disposal, and then fell backwards in a clumsy mess.

But a brute grabbed his waist from behind and squeezed tightly. A moment later the handle of a pole-axe thudded heavily into his stomach, winding him. He had been surrounded this entire time, and couldn’t have stood a chance.

Marcellus looked downward, not even seeing his attackers as he fought against the tidal impact of the pole-axe handle. The one who had grabbed him threw him powerfully to the floor, and stood on his shoulder, pinning him.

They turned him around and pummelled his face with their wide fists, using their full weight to smash his face in. Marcellus couldn’t even feel the blows, but he could feel his face becoming a distorted mess as each blow landed too quickly for him to count.

He blacked out.

When Marcellus came to his senses, he found that he was in a darkened cell. It was night again, he could tell from the window set in the ceiling, which was far out of reach. There were no glorious stars to behold, only a chill wind to make him feel more uncomfortable. His face felt numb, and he had a nasty stomach ache whenever he sat up or bent.

He took a tour of the cell, but there was only a wooden bench.

Why? Why was I burdened with the cloak? Why can't I even take it off?

Marcellus was very confused, just as much as he was by the actions of the guards. Who would have ordered the activities of the day to be ceased in order to attack a lone individual who happened to wear a black cloak?

It didn't make sense.

It was true that he hadn't seen anybody else wearing a cloak, but they still wore contrasting clothes.

Possession: they must have wanted the cloak for themselves.

The truth of it hit him like a wave. He wondered where all these truths came from, and why they seemed to be self-evident in hindsight. Was it to do with the cloak, or was it just how he was? He hadn't lived long, so he couldn't make an accurate assessment.

As Marcellus again sampled the material of the cloak between his fingers, he imagined that to others it was fine, of high quality, and a luxury. It was therefore understandable why *somebody* would want it...

Marcellus pondered many questions in his imprisonment. Food and drink were pushed through the bottom of the cell door, which was too thin to crawl through. Sometimes he heard the thudding feet of guards outside. Besides the chill wind, Marcellus spent the night alone, huddled in the quiet on the wooden bench that was his one companion.

When day came Marcellus' face felt ruined. Parts of it would drip blood, and the aches it gave him were unbearable. The sharp pains sometimes caused him to yell in agony. The pains and aches gave him headaches, but overall his head and mind still felt numb.

The terrifying images of yesterday's fight came rushing back in the morning, causing his heart to beat very fast.

He knew he wouldn't survive another harsh beating. It was likely that he already had severe internal head damage, or at least it felt as if he had, though his knowledge of the extent of damage was limited to his physical perception.

The guard unlocked the cell door and beckoned Marcellus out. Marcellus felt timid, and was slow to respond. The guard yanked him out and dragged him by what was left of the fine black hair on his head. Small tufts of hair had been falling out, presumably because of the swelling on his face. Marcellus submitted, if only to avoid further harsh treatment or physical violence.

Marcellus was led outside, in broad daylight, and then up a flight of concrete steps to a higher level, where there was a spacious chamber that had windows without panes that were open to the breezy air. Marcellus was ushered inside and thrown before somebody familiar who sat on a large luxurious brown couch set against the wall, which was at odds with the dull appearance of the grey featureless chamber.

He lifted his heavy head to appraise the figure on the couch.

This one was muscular and lean, wearing only a loin-cloth and golden bracelets and anklets. His white eyes spoke of violence and murder, having only a small black pupil in the middle. There was something familiar about his countenance.

'My name is Aerol. I saw you enter the building of my headquarters. Are you a spy, and if you are why wear that distinguishable black cloak?'

'I'm not a spy, I entered without knowing whose building it was,' Marcellus spoke softly.

'We tried to rip your cloak off, but it wouldn't be removed. Is it a weapon?' Aerol spoke threateningly.

'I don't know what it is,' Marcellus confessed helplessly.

'Wrong answer!' Aerol said icily. 'Bring the seven prisoners!'

The guard saluted and stomped outside, and was gone in a heartbeat. The air was tense and thick, with anticipation, and Marcellus had that same nervous feeling in his gut that he had when being attacked by the brutish guards, and so a presentiment of inevitable doom activated his fight-or-flight instincts.

'I'm not lying,' he insisted, wondering how much it sounded as if he was pleading.

Aerol stared back at him with steely eyes and an implacable expression. The air around him was dead, or spoke of death, and Marcellus glanced to the windows and considered diving out of them to

avoid whatever horrid event or attack he knew was going to occur. But they were too many paces away, and he was pinned to the spot by Aerol's grim stare.

'You have several guards watching you from behind you, and they're not in concealed positions. And my eyes can see everything you think and plan before you do it. Do not do anything foolish, lest the punishment shall be more severe,' Aerol hissed.

Marcellus had not even seen his blood-purple lips moving. The words just softly impacted him, with a suggestion in a tone that did not come across as a threat, even though it was. It was not clear that Aerol was speaking to him, but he must have been. That was when Marcellus realised he was standing alone, in the centre of the room, which had seemed to grow when he was the centre of Aerol's attention.

The prisoners were shoved inside the room without ceremony, by the same set of burly guards who had beaten him up. They slumped to the floor, backs bent, with golden manacles weighing their arms down behind their backs, connected by heavy chains. They appeared underfed and bruised, but Marcellus could not mistake that look of hatred they bestowed upon Aerol, as if they were hungry for retribution. Their backs went up and down repeatedly as they laboured with their breathing just a few steps in front of Marcellus, and closer to the deadly presence on Aerol seated on the couch. Was it even possible for Aerol to feel fear?

'Free the prisoners with the keys,' Aerol said dismissively. 'Hold Marcellus back away from them – protect him.'

What kind of game is this?

The guards approached the prisoners warily, and inserted their keys into the padlocks that balanced ponderously on the chains to release them; eyes fixed on their backs for any sudden movements. Their steps towards the prisoners had been measured, and furthered the feeling of impending doom that now began to crush Marcellus' heart with a hammer of terror. A squeaking noise sounded, of locks moving. Like a caged beast about to be released from a cavernous dungeon. The keys were about to turn.

'Let me deal with them...' Aerol commanded.

In that time Marcellus was confused who he was commanding and what the significance of the command was.

Do I prepare to defend myself? What can I do but observe?

Click ... Squeak! Click!

The tension had been unlocked, and a fury of force was about to erupt. Marcellus braced himself, tensing the slender muscles of his arms and shoulders in futile defence.

The noise signalled the onset of battle and the prisoners rushed Aerol en masse, clawing at the couch to scar him, but somebody – something -- moved too fast for Marcellus to perceive, like a blot of mass that displaced the air after each jarring attack. All of which hurt Marcellus' eyes.

In one puzzling movement a prisoner's arms were wrenched by a hurtling bipedal vice, and Marcellus heard limbs snap broken. The arms flopped, and were now useless; what had made them strong was broken. Aerol was now to the right for a moment, having an infinitesimal pause. Like an iron bar, Aerol's straight arm crashed into the neck of another, cracking the hull of his control and felling him onto the ground, his eyes lolling heedlessly. Was he dead?

Aerol's palms crushed the air around their bodies, sending attacks to their sides, heads, and faces in movements that were clear strikes originating from his whirling body. All the while he moved like a vortex of reflexes, dismembering pieces of his enemies and applying incapacitating strikes with two straight fingers.

It was about over and as soon as it had begun. Four prisoners were on the floor, either life or consciousness having left them. The other three prisoners stood in a daze, recomposing themselves for the final attack. One had picked up the chains of his manacle and was swinging them.

'Time to finish you savages,' Aerol announced.

Two punches aimed at Aerol's head found empty air. Aerol drew a sword from a golden scabbard that seemed to materialise out of thin air. He slashed it through the attacking prisoner's side, and blood spurted out, spraying Aerol in a fountain of red but not causing him to recoil at all. Aerol turned a second later, and slashed the thigh of the next with speed and ferocity that the prisoner was paralysed with shock.

'Aargghh!' Aerol roared.

He kicked the felled prisoner with force, blasting him backward with an expression of utmost agony on his face that was his last expression in life. He had only lost nearly one leg; something Marcellus stared at in disbelief.

‘Grrhh!’ Aerol said, summoning up ultimate strength and implanting his fist into the supine body of an unmoving prisoner. A dull thud was the only sound as Marcellus saw multi-hued internal organs heave upward on inner ropes before being tugged back down again. There were so many colours. So many colours, and it had happened with incredible speed. When Aerol retracted his fist, Marcellus noticed there were huge black cracks spreading around the supine prisoner, and a violet scar coating a gaping black void the size of a fist that was larger than both of Marcellus’ bony ones. There was no blood in that wound, as if the fist had impacted with such purpose that it had sealed the damage.

The last prisoner had not attacked yet, but began swinging his manacle-chain again, eyeing Aerol carefully and assessing his next move. This one was cautious, but did not show fear. He was sure-footed as he eyed Aerol and it looked like he was more on his level of fighting ability. The angles of their stances shifted as they prepared to look for weaknesses or for some vantage in the fight. Whatever these warriors could see was beyond Marcellus’ ken.

‘Finally, a prisoner with some fighting experience,’ Aerol said in relief.

A sly strike and the chain whistled through the air close to Aerol’s head, but Aerol ducked low with ease and agility, spun his body while in a crouch, and sent a high kick that connected with the jaw of his opponent, and then circled him like a hungry predator looking for weaknesses. His opponent clutched his jaw with one hand and was buffeted back a few paces.

At that moment, the room shrunk and Marcellus tried to escape from the unbreakable hold of the guards, and he hadn’t even noticed them grasping him to begin with; as fixated on Aerol as he was.

Aerol threw two practised abdominal punches at his opponent, winding him, but his opponent was standing again. Marcellus got the impression Aerol was only testing the opponent in order to decide his next move.

‘Not fought one as skilled as since ...’

His opponent lunged, but Aerol had successfully distracted him and had his head in a vice made of his own arms, using the lock to control the prisoner’s body. The chain was dropped and forgotten about as the prisoner thrashed for his life. The fight had turned drastically in Aerol’s favour.

‘You could have had potential, but you fought for the side of thieves and parasites, and I lost many good soldiers because of your savagery. Those soldiers were my friends, and you butchered them in your ambush. Aggression begets aggression, do you not agree?’

‘I know what you’re thinking: “Finish me now, or I will return with an army later” or “Please, for the sake of *Majesty*, you’re overreacting” and you’ll still return with your army. I know only underhanded tricks work for you scavengers, but this is war. Aggression begets aggression.’

‘You’re insane!’ the opponent protested with a scratched voice.

‘Let me go. This is torture. Let me die a soldier’s death,’ the opponent pleaded.

‘Only soldiers or friends may die soldiers’ deaths, and you are neither.’

There was an audible crack and life escaped from the prisoner, as the desperation in his eyes petered out. He dropped to his knees, but then Aerol slashed his sword diagonally, and the opponent’s head split open, revealing a swollen pumping grey mass with veins with a gaping raw split in the middle that was getting larger. The sack of skin that had covered his head and face split fully open and rolled comically on the floor, not too far away from the cracks of Aerol’s earlier atrocity.

Aerol’s gaze fixated on Marcellus, and he jumped in response to the unforeseen change in focus. The air itself must have ripped away from the deceased.

‘See what happens to those who oppose me? They were enemies, but you are not loyal or trustworthy, so I suggest you give me what I want. Take that cloak off!’

‘If it is bewitched and doesn’t come off, as he says, then return to me,’ he then ordered the guards.

‘The cloak doesn’t come off. We have tried everything possible,’ the guard behind him grunted in a deep voice.

Aerol nodded and began to speak in guttural tones. He raised his mottled purple fingers to his pink thin lips, and looked speculative.

‘If it is a weapon, then it is one we know nothing of. The other Warlords have not developed anything this advanced that we know of.’

‘It could be sorcery, Mighty Warlord!’ a guard boldly suggested, promptly bowing afterwards to signal his subservience.

‘Yes, it could be...’ Aerol pondered. ‘The Sorcerers of Banuk are potent and secretive. It is conceivable they could have created such a cloak.’

They spoke as if Marcellus was not there to hear their words. Aerol wasn’t even looking at him. It was the cloak they were interested in. As far as they were concerned it was only an accident that it was attached to him, or at least he hoped they thought that.

Aerol’s face pressed close to Marcellus’, and he breathed his next words in rapid succession:

‘I need that cloak, or a weapon that can help me defeat the other Warlords. You will be the key to achieving my aims. Do not cross me!’ he finished, sitting back up and looking back at the guard he had been speaking to earlier.

Marcellus did not even consider betraying Aerol. There was something sinister about his threats and his bearing. Besides, it wasn’t as if Marcellus had any other option, for he knew very little of this world and its inhabitants, though their appearance was similar.

Marcellus nodded briefly.

‘Good,’ Aerol cooed in mock humour. ‘Summon Commander Cress here immediately! Take this individual back to his cell, and double the guard; he will be very important to us I am sure.’

The guard nodded and roughly yanked Marcellus by the neck to lift him up.

‘Wait!’ the steel tone of Warlord Aerol resounded.

There was a palpable stillness in the air.

‘What is your name?’ Aerol demanded.

‘Marcellus,’ he replied obediently.

‘Ensure Marcellus is not harmed!’ Aerol commanded, switching his glance to the guard, who then nodded meekly, and instead gestured for Marcellus to follow, which he did.

Chapter Two – The Times

Marcellus hadn't been manhandled, which he was thankful for. And yet, he suspected the respect was only an illusion and that something else was at work here that he was not privy to. Sure enough, he wasn't in his cell long before a faint knock could be heard. His ears pricked in response, but he thought he'd ignore it. Maybe it was a guard on patrol who accidentally banged his elbow.

Louder this time, the knock could be a set of knuckles rapping on his door. Seriously, who knocked on a prisoner's door?

Marcellus rose and answered.

'Come in?'

'Marcellus,' a voice gasped in relief. 'My name is Commander Cress. I have been sent on behalf of Warlord Aerol to acquaint you with how we do things here.'

'You can come in. I can't open the door from this side.'

'Of course.'

Commander Cress fiddled with a set of clinking eyes and opened the locks. The door creaked ajar, and he was staring at Marcellus with mixture and puzzlement. For a Commander – an individual of rank – he had ordinary garb that was reminiscent of a servant's. Whether he was off-duty or trying to put Marcellus at ease after his nasty experience with soldiers, was not clear.

Commander Cress' sickly green eyes were large, giving his face a skull-like appearance that made him look perpetually shocked. It was the first face Marcellus looked upon and examined, trying to understand the personality based on the face.

Do I look strange to him?

'Take a seat, Marcellus.'

They both slumped down next to each other on the wooden bench. The door had been left open, but no guards roamed with heavy footfalls. Only dust could be seen reflected by light, putting the cracked and gaping black holes of the damaged walls into stark relief. The fortress was empty at this time, giving a silent break that Marcellus needed. He wondered if he needed to sleep again – he couldn't stay awake long in this scary environment.

'Where did you come from?' Commander Cress asked.

'The bridge,' he said simply.

'That doesn't make sense. Who are your parents?'

'I have no parents. Are they like guards?'

Cress stared at him a while longer, and then shook his head in disbelief.

'You do not belong here,' he reminded him.

'I don't know where *here* is,' Marcellus countered.

'You're on our home-world *Majesty*.'

'Are there more worlds?'

'No, this is where we belong. This is home.'

'Home as opposed to—'

'The Black Chasm. Did you not see it beneath your bridge?'

'I have a vague recollection. Is it a hole?'

'Yes, and if you fall down it will swallow you entirely.'

'Then what will happen?'

'You will die. It's as simple as that. You will cease to exist on *Majesty*.'

'Is it not possible you will survive elsewhere, in some other place?'

'No, probably not. Nobody would risk it. It's unfamiliar, dangerous, and massive; too substantial for a lone Tekromun to fathom.'

'It does look daunting. I don't want to fall down there,' Marcellus agreed. 'What's a Tekromun?'

'It's what we are,' and Cress clapped him on the back of his shoulder, and then recoiled because the Mantle flinched in response.

'We're living beings, and are similar. We are Tekromun, but what does Tekromun mean?'

'An old warrior who uses tools in a central civilisation.'

'Interesting. Where is this central civilisation? Are we inside it?'

'No, no we're not. I suppose the entirety of *Majesty* is the central civilisation. We live in a different time: of turbulence and warlords.'

‘Fighting and violence?’

‘Exactly. We soldiers swear fealty to Warlord Aerol, who is one of the strongest and most cunning of leaders. Our warlord will lead us to victory against the other warlords. We believe!’

Cress tightened his fist and raised it in vigour, causing Marcellus to jump in surprise.

‘I’m not a soldier...’

‘No, Aerol has a different plan for you. You are to be his weapon to help us achieve victory. I’ve been ordered to take you to the Sorcerers of Banuk, who may understand how to remove your cloak. On the way, you will be forbidden from asking me impertinent question in front of the other soldiers, do you understand? I’m a Commander and I must be respected. As far as everybody else is concerned, besides Warlord Aerol, we never had this conversation.’

‘I understand. I do want the cloak removed, but Warlord Aerol scares me.’

‘He scares a lot of us, but do not disobey him. Death comes quicker than the Black Chasm to those who disobey or betray Warlord Aerol; he is wise and skilled in the way we use our minds. Right now, as we sit talking in this room, he knows how we will speak and how our thoughts inform our actions.’

‘Is it magic?’

‘No, it’s ruthlessness Marcellus. If you learn anything you can use to survive on *Majesty*, it must be ruthlessness. Your enemies will give you no mercy.’

‘I have enemies. Are the soldiers my enemies?’

‘No, Aerol’s soldiers are now your friends, so do not displease them, but other soldiers would give you more than a beating; they’d disembowel you with their bare hands, eat your flesh, and dangle you over the edge of a bridge. You’re lucky Aerol saw promise in your cloak where others would see advantage.’

‘Aerol ordered his soldiers to beat me!’

‘No, he ordered you to be taken in, and they interpreted those orders as they know best. You can’t blame us. This is how we live, in these times of scarcity.’

‘No resources?’

‘Little food and too many enemies with different politics. Too much competition to become the Overlord of the *Majesty*.’

‘Was it always like this?’

‘What little I know of history is that there have been times of peace and short periods of prosperity. Even now, there are ordinary civilians – parents – bringing new Tekromun, tykes, into the world. The past was apparently a time of sorcery – what you called magic. What we do suspect is that *Majesty* has grown into its namesake, becoming larger, more diverse, and glorious. There is now more to fight over than ever there was.’

‘If we let go of our fear, we could live in a better place,’ Marcellus suggested.

‘Dangerous thoughts Marcellus, especially for one as new and naïve to the world as you are. Focus on your survival, and above all, adapt and learn. If you don’t, you’ll become a part of that history I have just related to you.’

‘What a horrible, harsh world.’

‘No, the world is beautiful ... a masterpiece. It’s something to behold and worship. The times are what’s wrong, but there isn’t much to be done about it.’

‘The times?’

‘Great Barbarism.’

Chapter Three – The March

He had no idea how far they would have to march, and he had a headache from the beating he had received only yesterday. Nobody seemed to have noticed the mess that was his face, perhaps because some of the company were guilty of having caused it. It didn't bother him, for he couldn't remember the faces of his attackers; they were like phantoms that had come at him too fast for him to perceive and register as reality. Besides, if he had to blame one Tekromun, he would have blamed Aerol.

'You are unusual,' Commander Cress stated brusquely, striding at the head of the armed unit.

Marcellus silently considered his words.

Commander Cress had huge rippling purple muscles on his arms and legs. He wore steel chain-mail, a spiked helmet, and shoulder-plates. As he surged forward, the ranks followed behind swiftly, and Marcellus had opportunity to study this Tekromun.

Cress wasn't remarkable in appearance, but he was in bearing. He carried himself proudly, rather than aggressively or violently. It could have been his high rank, he reasoned, but there did seem to be something different about him. It was ironic, after having heard Cress' first words to Marcellus.

'Who are the Sorcerers of Banuk?'

Cress' gaze was vicious as his head spun to face Marcellus, his sickly green eyes flaring in warning.

'Never address a Tekromun Officer without first acknowledging his rank!' Cress reprimanded.

Marcellus bowed his head in acknowledgement, and was now reminded of their earlier discussion.

'Commander, who are the Sorcerers of Banuk?' Marcellus tried again with subservience.

'They're sorcerers!'

'Why 'Banuk', Commander?'

'I don't know the origin of the word if that's what you're asking me,' Cress replied with a softer tone. 'It's an old familiar word, attached to a name that I've forgotten. 'Nuk' sounds mysterious to me; which makes me think of magical mysticism, and 'Ban' is often used to mean that something is 'hidden'.'

'Why are there words that are easily understandable in the common tongue, while proper names and objects of significance are obscure?'

'I suppose it's precisely their significance that requires more complex meanings. You've quite a mind for philosophy Marcellus, like the ancients, however we're going to *visit* the Sorcerers with an invasion, so I suggest you step in line with the soldiers, and keep your questions to yourself.'

Marcellus felt rejected, until he belatedly noticed the suspicious looks painted on the faces of the burly soldiers behind him, who stomped in a regular march, with not one of them deviating. Their faces seemed to ask 'what gives you the privilege to speak to the Commander'. Well, he wasn't a soldier to begin with, but he wouldn't put it past the soldiers to 'interpret their orders' in their own way again by giving him another round of severe beatings.

'Is it wise to attack sorcerers ... Commander?' Marcellus added ruefully.

'They are our orders, given by Mighty Warlord Aerol. We must obey, regardless of what we think of them,' Cress confided.

The armed march was at a fast pace, but he felt as if things were moving slowly. Their progression covered expanses of long grey bridges and walkways, far from the irregular grey structures of buildings; some of which were currently crumbling into a discoloured brown powder that fell in trickles down into the meaningless void below, shrinking to a minute size before being swallowed by that other reality. Marcellus paused, staring at the misshapen mess that must have been the base of a building.

'Marcellus! What are you doing?' Cress bellowed at him.

But Marcellus could only hear distant irrelevant voice. For behind the crumbling walls of the building were weapons, and splayed bodies with limbs having been chopped off. Silver axes were laid beside them tipped with blood that looked like rust. There were evil-looking flails, sitting at the edges, as if abandoned in favour of killing weapons that had shorter range. The grey floor looked like it could have belonged to the lobby of Aerol's fortress.

Marcellus stepped forward and climbed, raising his leg high over the top of the wall, and then he investigated the bodies. There was a faded bit of scroll attached by a string to the chrome necklace

worn by a Tekromun who had died in a supine position. He crouched and picked it up, rustling the parchment in his fingers to try and make out the text.

'For my newborn tyke son, I will fight.'

Tears emerged from Marcellus' eyes like a flood, and he wiped them away as fast as he could with his forearms. Cress placed his hand on his shoulder, and looking back confirmed that it was Cress. The other soldiers had stopped their marching and looked outside the wall in solidarity.

'We cannot delay Marcellus. There is only pain in the past.'

'He gave life to a Tekromun, and now he has departed from that life, in senseless fighting,' Marcellus shouted. Nobody reacted violently, in fact they looked towards the bodies in sympathy and mourning.

'These were enemies,' Cress said emphatically.

'And you're all enemies to them,' Marcellus reminded. *'Behold what has been lost!'*

And after that had been said, one by one they picked up the bodies and tossed them over the bridges respectfully. The bodies fell in what appeared to be a straight line, plummeting heavily downward. Their belongings were collected and tossed over afterwards, even the weapons, which they told Marcellus Aerol wouldn't like it. There was such a united feeling among them at having seen the dead and listened to Marcellus – nobody would willingly tell Aerol. It was a unique shared experience, and one that made Marcellus feel closer to his Tekromun brothers.

'Those pickets you see over there to the right are where we held out for a full day against the soldiers of two Warlords,' Cress boasted. *'They jumped from the platforms of the covered bridge, fighting only with their bare hands and their bloodlust. They had us surrounded, but we stayed in a tight protective unit and only struck outward on my orders. We must have felled thrice our number.'*

'I clobbered over nine with my club,' a soldier yelled from behind.

Cress threw his head back and laughed.

'It was a glorious, victorious day.'

Marcellus looked at the battlefield but none of the dead could be seen. The covered bridges were tall from top to bottom, and made out of the same grey material that he was unfamiliar with, and which Cress called 'crete' – a rough durable substance that was often used for building. The battlefield was becoming more distant now, for which Marcellus was thankful.

'You see over to the left are terraced wooden fortresses, once ruled by Warlord Wor, who challenged Aerol for all of the small boxy buildings enveloping that cul-de-sac. The problem was that the wooden fortresses were all he owned, and our soldiers infiltrated the boxy buildings and butchered their forces. Warlord Wor was a formidable Warlord and used spies and assassins to creep up on us in the dead of night. We lost a deal of soldiers to him.'

'And the civilians, did they live in the boxy buildings?'

'There were some, but the smart ones soon evacuated. If there are safer places, they'll live there, but I've heard rumour that many civilians live under the shelter in the sub-levels of the buildings; oft referred to as the Underground.'

The wooden fortresses were pockmarked by scorches, and the odd arrow or two still stuck in the building. Marcellus would be surprised if anybody lived there now, and he was concerned by Cress talking about butchering 'forces'. Who exactly was considered to be a part of a force? Could not somebody innocent, a non-soldier like him, be caught in the midst of soldiers as Marcellus had in Aerol's lobby?

'Since we defeated Warlord Wor, our southern expansion marked a new level of growth for us. None of our enemies would initiate attacks without summoning better armed forces, and they took us seriously.'

'How did Warlord Wor die?'

'We broke into his command room, outflanked his guard, and attacked him en masse.'

'Where is the honour in that? How could Warlord Wor possibly have fought back?'

'Warlord Wor killed our soldiers with such dishonour. They would hide under bridges, use hooks to get back up, and then slit our throats as we slept. As we slept.'

'You have become your enemies.'

‘You would accuse us of dishonour when you have not lost brothers-in-arms or families to the other warlords. You have not seen their mangled bodies before you ... a connection ripped from your existence. Do not judge us until you battle with us and experience what we do.’

‘How many civilians have died because of your zealotry?’

Cress turned around fully and slapped him, causing a harsh stinging sensation all over his sore face. It had happened before Marcellus knew he was about to be slapped. Cress walked closer towards him, and ignoring the soldiers’ pause in marching, whispered very carefully to him.

‘Do you think we want civilians to die? None of us do, or at least none of the soldiers I call my brothers. They get caught up in battles, slaughtered in the midst of a massacre, crushed by a fortress under siege, or killed for the pleasure of barbarians.’

‘You’ve never killed a civilian?’

‘My record of kills and deaths is not for your scrutiny Marcellus. Only Aerol can request it of me.’

‘Does nobody else outrank you?’

‘Nobody else I wouldn’t kill if he insisted.’

After the intense whsipers Cress turned back around to lead the march, and the soldiers continued to march, pretending as if nothing had occurred. Marcellus had the feeling he had upset some careful balance, by speaking out of turn to Commander, which surprised him almost as much as the fact that Cress had not properly punished him for it before them.

‘When did this happen?’ he asked again when he thought the air was clear between them.

‘Only about ten years ago.’

‘But you said Warlord Aerol has been alive for hundreds of years?’

‘He has, but advancement during Great Barbarism has been tedious. There are victories, and setbacks. It’s a vicious cycle of death and renewal. We can hope for victories, prosperity, and stories to tell our tykes. In the end, it won’t make a difference to *Majesty*.’

‘A vicious cycle,’ Marcellus repeated.

Chapter Four – Tower of Banuk

‘You speak of brothers all of the time, but what about the female Tekromun? Are there no female soldiers under Aerol’s command?’

‘They are prizes to be fought over, rewards to be given to those who prove themselves, and—
‘And...’

‘Sometimes they bear our tykes. I mean, they always bear our tykes, and help us start families.’

‘They are treated like objects, and yet they are vital if new life is to be given. Why is this?’

‘As soldiers, females are not held in high regard, partly because they are often needed to start new families and reproduce new soldiers. With civilians, the rules may be different. I wouldn’t know though.’

‘I saw females in the lobby of Aerol’s fortress. They had jobs to do and appeared pleasant.’

‘Careful Marcellus! Do not speak openly about the beauty of females. There are Tekromun who would fight you for their attention, especially the prettier or more curvaceous they are.’

‘Those females are considered servants. They are treated well in Aerol’s fortress because they are young, beautiful, and pleasant; and because they’re obedient to Aerol like the rest of us. They have roles in administering parchment and handling any communication between the divisions of our army. Their skills have come in useful to us for the past forty years, and Aerol hasn’t considered ruling without their skills since. This is one of the ways we differ from our rivals.’

‘I worry how little is known about females on Majesty.’

‘They’re a mystery,’ Cress agreed, ‘but they’re still Tekromun like you and me. I frown upon those who would treat them as inferiors – nay, I would kill such.’

‘How else does Aerol’s army differ from rivals?’

‘We’re well organised, and Aerol only recruits those he trusts. We’re trusted with our responsibilities, military excursions, and missions; but he expects us to report back to him in person. Aerol himself has led numerous skirmishes, to increase morale. He may appear intimidating and untouchable, but he gives us the notion that he is one of us, a warrior.’

‘Is he a good soldier?’

‘Warlord Aerol? He’s the best! None can out-think him and his reflexes are extraordinary, but then his age has granted him physical strength, speed, and experience. I’m only seventy years old – young for a Tekromun. You’re practically a newborn tyke in the body of one fully grown. It doesn’t make any sense, but Aerol ordered us not to question your differences.’

‘Do you know why I am newborn and I’m not a tyke?’

‘No. There are those,’ Cress whispered, ‘who think you’re a freak.’

Cress and Marcellus looked back at the implacable expressions of the marching soldiers.

‘I think myself a freak.’

‘Well don’t, and not until you learn more about yourself. Maybe if we catch a few of these sorcerers alive they will help. Speak of the Sorcerer – we’ve arrived. That dark domed edifice you see rising beyond the walkways, is the Tower of Banuk,’ Cress informed him.

On their march Cress had seen it as his responsibility to make him aware of the various landmarks they had passed, and the Tower of Banuk wouldn’t have been an exception if it had not been the intended destination. Though the brief names and basic facts given about the landmarks piqued his interest on occasion, nothing was committed to memory because he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts: his purpose among a group that was full with an intent he didn’t understand.

From the way Cress treated him, it was obvious he had a privileged status as the bearer of the cloak, compared with the other soldiers or any ordinary Tekromun. He began to understand that they couldn’t dispose of him without disposing of the cloak, which was knowledge he could use for his survival. He was unsure how he felt about being special, but it may keep him alive until he learnt more about his strange predicament.

‘Why are there no walkways connecting to the Tower, Commander? How does a Tekromun gain entry?’

‘That is a mystery none of us know,’ Cress admitted.

‘Do they suspect an attack, Commander?’

Cress sighed, ignored his question, and proceeded to inspect the ranks behind him to ensure there was adequate discipline. Marcellus could vaguely sense their anxiety.

‘We don’t know, but we’ll have to try to attack them,’ Cress said fatalistically.

‘We can’t reach the Tower without dropping to the Black Chasm, and none of us can fly, Commander...’

‘I know, we’ll think of a stratagem.’

They camped on the edge of the walkway. For the rest of the day they didn’t see anything move outside or within the Tower. It stood there motionlessly, as if it was abandoned.

The Tekromun started to fall asleep, their armour clinking and rustling unsettlingly. Their loud snores irritated Marcellus, for he wanted greater awareness of his surroundings now that it was dark.

Marcellus’ senses had been on high alert, with his hearing stretching across the distances, touching the empty featureless sky and rebounding back. The air was cool, and when buffeted by the wind the sensation of it made him feel small in this giant world he had been born into, or as if all the elements in existence were watching him, keen to his every slight movement or twitch of his eye.

Despite this, after a short time his mind ceased activity and thoughts dissipated. Marcellus was drifting off to sleep, which was still an unfamiliar and occasionally scary process for him, because he didn’t have control over when he slipped into its irresistible embrace. He wondered if sleep was a regular and normal activity for a Tekromun – it must be if the others were fast asleep. Yet, it was odd that they were unaware while he could freely observe them. Their vulnerability made him think of his.

At the same time, it was comforting to be sleeping in close proximity to the burly soldiers, with their laboured breathing. Their presence was reassuring, like a bunch of buildings that combined to protect against the boundless unknown.

While his mind became dizzy with his increasingly frequent thoughts, his legs and arms started to ache, so he slowed his thoughts down and surrendered to the will of nature, releasing a few yawns before turning over.

Snap.

He jolted to attention, to see the perverse apparition of an extremely thin Tekromun with a bald head, dressed in a dark umber robe. The Tekromun didn’t look as if he was standing on the platform where they were collectively sleeping, for his feet were a few inches from the ground, and the entire apparition flickered repeatedly. *Is he normal size, or does he just appear to be smaller? It’s a dangerous trick, of some sort.*

Marcellus hissed, baring the rows of his sharp pointed teeth, to ward away the Tekromun.

‘Marcellus,’ the sorcerer whispered. ‘Come with me,’ he entreated, holding out an emaciated hand. ‘I’ve been listening to you and soldiers before you went to sleep, and that’s how I learnt your name. Please, come with me, and I will protect you from them.’

Marcellus took it, seeing no alternative if he wanted more answers about this world, and because he felt slightly uncomfortable as the centre of attention among Aerol’s soldiers.

He was taken to a different realm, inside a vast library composed of dusty scrolls in murky brown covers, and with glowing candlelight throwing dancing shadows across the warm beige and brown room.

‘Where am I?’

‘My name is Galouch. I am the Sorcerer of Banuk,’ the Tekromun announced.

‘There is only one of you?’ Marcellus asked in astonishment.

Galouch continued to touch the texture of the black cloak, and to take scrolls from the rotting dark brown shelves.

‘I don’t yet know what it is. It is not something with which I am familiar.’

‘If I can take it off, you can study it all you like.’

Galouch’s warm hazel eyes gazed into Marcellus’.

‘I don’t think you understand how serious your predicament is.’

Marcellus stared at him, clueless.

‘On the home-world, there are no powers that can help you to take it off. There is one sorcerer, and you are staring glumly at him. And I am ... uncomprehending.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying this cloak you wear did not come from the home-world. It came from the stars. In other words, there is no power here that can help you, I’m sorry.’

‘I won’t give up,’ Marcellus vowed. ‘There will be other sorcerers, if not now, then in the future.’

Galouch shook his bald head in hopelessness.

‘I was telling the truth, there is only me. If you wish, I can help you to become a sorcerer. It may aid you in your endeavour?’

Marcellus was shocked at hearing the offer.

If I became a sorcerer, then I would learn much. Maybe I would be able to see where this sorcerer cannot.

‘That sounds tempting, but there is an invasion force outside that wants answers.’

‘The Tower of Banuk is unassailable, so we’ll be safe.’

‘Warlord Aerol is looking for answers. He thinks the cloak is a weapon he can use to defeat the other Warlords.’

Marcellus realised he was talking himself out of the offer, and partly because he feared what Aerol was capable of.

‘Warlord Aerol is no more of a threat than any of the countless other Warlords,’ Galouch answered.

Despite the words, Marcellus still felt uneasy. There was something about Aerol that made him squirm. The steely determination in Aerol’s eyes showed he would stop at nothing to achieve his ambitions.

‘Will you allow me to return to Commander Cress?’ Marcellus wondered aloud.

‘If you learn to prevent me from stopping you...’ Galouch smirked testily.

Marcellus briefly cycled through the alternatives in his mind. It was clear Galouch might be capable of much more than his pleasant demeanour suggested, and was it worth fighting through a sorcerer just to return to Cress, who Marcellus only wanted to return to because of his familiarity?

It’s as if I felt an obligation to accompany Cress to invade the Tower of Banuk just because it was Aerol’s will to do so. Now I am faced with another will; the will of the benign sorcerer whose personality appears at first glance to be easier to turn down.

Cowardice or to make the correct decision?

It was Marcellus’ first moral dilemma, and he struggled with it for some time, as Galouch stared at him expectantly with his mouth moving back and forth.

I do not feel up to challenging the sorcerer for the sake of fear. Do I fear everyone I come across?

It was a problem he would come to be familiar with; that many Tekromuns wanted to coerce others into doing what they wanted. Many had a plan or goal in mind when they did, but the only thing Marcellus wanted was peace and personal safety, and couldn’t as of yet fathom any motive that would involve others, unless it concerned his damned cloak!

I will accept.

‘I accept, if you try your best to help me remove the cloak. In return, I will learn sorcery and offer any help you need,’ Marcellus said boldly, standing up straight with his chest puffed out into a posture that he thought was unlike him.

Galouch turned away and used a downward motion with his palm, presumably to signal agreement, but from the side Marcellus could see the large smile coating the sorcerer’s face, completely transforming his mottled features and making them look momentary ambitious.

I feel I can trust this sorcerer, and I suppose it’s okay for him to be excited and to have ambition. I wonder if my judgement of his reaction is accurate.

Chapter Five – Master Galouch

‘What you must learn about sorcery is that it is not some arcane instrument,’ Galouch said. ‘Sorcery is simply a name given to anything that is not widely understood, such as a special branch of knowledge.’

‘What do you mean?’ Marcellus asked in naivety.

‘I mean that the sorcery I know will not satisfy your preconceptions of it.’

‘The only preconception I have of sorcery is of an attached cloak that cannot be undone,’ Marcellus replied.

‘Okay, well we’ll proceed then. The sorcery is known as Banuk Sorcery. I mainly use it as a tool to fool everybody. You see, I am a coward; I run and hide.’

‘Tell me of this sorcery!’ Marcellus demanded, surprising himself.

Galouch leant forward, the skin of his jaw stretched taut against its lean curve. His eyes beamed with the chance to discuss sorcery.

‘There are seven disciplines. You will learn them all.’

Marcellus nodded in understanding. He was excited, and his mind was already spinning with the potential possibilities. He wondered how Galouch had used Banuk Sorcery to make sure the Tower of Banuk appeared differently.

As Marcellus sat, he was entranced by Galouch’s words. Galouch took out scrolls and showed him diagrams that he had drawn and even diagrams that had been drawn by his Master, the Tekromun who had taught him sorcery. They depicted sketches of Tekromun bodies appearing in different positions and how the correct channels in the mind were applied for different results.

After days of being engrossed in Galouch’s study and his scrolls, Marcellus started to practise outside, listening attentively to everything Galouch taught him. They practised the basics together in abandoned areas, out of sight of any patrols.

One evening, Marcellus was reading the last scroll on one of Galouch’s shelves; he had been that enthusiastic to learn. Galouch came up to him and took the scroll away firmly, but gently.

Marcellus looked at Galouch questioningly.

‘I won’t always be here Marcellus, but these scrolls will.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Marcellus asked, wondering if there was some imminent danger to Galouch’s life that he was unaware of.

‘It is better to spend time to practise than it is to read. The more experience you have the more successful you will be when I am not here.’

‘Are you going somewhere?’ Marcellus asked.

‘We live in a time of Warlords Marcellus. Life is never permanent in such conditions.’

Confused at his answer, Marcellus looked away and thought carefully about what Galouch wasn’t telling him.

Marcellus’ interest in Banuk Sorcery became an obsession. He would be engrossed in the many scrolls throughout every day, sometimes forgetting to respond to anything Galouch said to him. During the evenings they would both go outside under cover of darkness, to practise the theory Marcellus had learnt.

Most of the time, the evenings were silent, being completely devoid of noise. Marcellus found it strange that a place where there was so much life could have as many places where there were no audible or visible signs of it.

Galouch was not perturbed by the silence. For some reason he feared something, and loved the peace and quiet that made Marcellus feel uncomfortable. It felt like the cell in which he had first been imprisoned.

As stars twinkled overhead and large ponderous clouds sailed above, Marcellus was almost able to forget the pervasive chill during these practice sessions.

Galouch was a patient tutor, encouraging and nurturing Marcellus’ abilities.

‘It’s about opening new channels in your mind,’ Galouch explained. ‘Imagine a new building being built in your mind; before it becomes complete you need to start arranging and laying the foundations and properties.’

Marcellus could feel the strain these sessions took on his mind. He could feel parts of his brain straining and growing. It was a euphoric feeling; of new eyes opening that had never seen or received any external stimuli.

Galouch was wise, he started to understand. He must have been very old, maybe a thousand years or more. One day Marcellus asked how old he was, but his tutor didn’t answer.

As Marcellus started to gain proficiency in each of the seven disciplines, and read shelves more of the scrolls in Galouch’s study, he started to think about what he wanted in life. This was moreover the case because he had begun to ignore the presence of the black cloak that marred his existence simply by existing. It was a discomforting puzzle Marcellus could not understand. When he had been born, he had been pure, and then this alien object had come and ruined his peace of mind, by holding him a captive and drawing the attention of ruthless Warlords and their soldiers. It was a silent object that wrapped itself around him, hinting at malevolence but never delivering, as if it was indifferent to its host.

He started to look out of the miniature decorative holes that characterised the domed edifice of the Tower of Banuk. His eye would squeeze neatly into the space to glimpse the light of the outside, and he would dream, as if he was a caged animal who needed to escape.

Meanwhile Galouch would dally about, continuing with the routine that was his life.

Marcellus felt ambition swelling in his breast. As time went by, the fleeting memories of the brutality of his life before he had met Galouch would invade his dreams. There was a craving in his heart to reach out and touch the world, if only to find a purpose, a life where he didn’t feel as isolated and ... individual.

In his supine position, he was shadowing his face with his fingers as he thought about this. He sat up and resolved to go out without the consent of Galouch. Unfortunately Galouch noticed him and questioned him:

‘Why Marcellus, when there is everything you could possibly require for your survival right here? If you go alone you risk endangering yourself.’

Somehow, through his panic and questioning nature, Galouch had hit the crux of the matter: that Marcellus could no longer remain in this cage Galouch called home.

‘I need to find out, for myself,’ Marcellus justified.

‘Find out what?’ Galouch demanded, unwilling to let the matter drop.

‘Learning Banuk Sorcery has been my life, and I have learnt much, but I need more.’

‘What about your cloak?’

‘My cloak is an intrinsic part of me...’

‘You’re going to give up your quest to discover and understand the nature of the cloak that binds you? I think that foolish,’ he castigated.

‘I haven’t given up, but I’ll continue after I have been outside.’

‘Outside is dangerous Marcellus.’

‘Why?’ Marcellus challenged, implacably folding his arms.

Galouch breathed in defeat.

‘There are monstrous things outside. Inside is safe.’

‘You need to do better to convince me of the danger. There are Warlords, I know, but they are not always at war.’

‘How would you know?’ Galouch snapped bitterly, throwing his fist downwards.

Marcellus stared at his Master, the Tekromun who had taught him everything about Banuk Sorcery.

‘I’ll be back,’ he said resolutely. He turned around and left, leaving Galouch staring after him.

The adventure outside had been terrific. Marcellus had seen sights during the daytime, and on his own he felt he could form his own image of the outer world without the limiting constraints of practising Banuk Sorcery.

He had spied Tekromuns moving everywhere, chatting. There had been couples, young tykes, and groups of males patrolling the walkways. Marcellus had seen Tekromuns trading goods he had never seen in his life. He had climbed steps to view vistas he had never seen before. He had even spoken to lusty receptionists without the interference of male rivals.

It was as if Warlords had never existed. It had been a day of lively activity and pleasure. Marcellus knew tomorrow could be bloodshed, but only between the Warlords. Unless somebody wore a black cloak! He thought ruefully.

When he returned after a satisfying day, it was to walk in on a brooding Master.

‘Master Galouch, what troubles you?’

‘You trouble me, Marcellus. I fear for you, for your destiny.’

‘Why fear, run, hide, or live by cowardice?’ Marcellus posed.

‘It’s what keeps us alive,’ Galouch proclaimed loudly, lifting himself up from the couch and turning around to regard Marcellus.

‘You think we are that different from ordinary Tekromuns? Sorcery can be hidden, can it not?’

‘It can, but will you hide it?’ Galouch tested.

It was a good question, and Marcellus didn’t know the answer.

‘I repeat: would you use sorcery to save your life?’

‘It is likely,’ Marcellus admitted.

‘It is as I feared ... you will one day find yourself in the uncomfortable position where you feel you must use sorcery, and when you do you will expose yourself to the Warlords. They will hunt you down, and they will scour your body and your mind to learn your secrets. You will never be safe, and nor will the secrets you hold in your mind and your heart.’

And then it clicked in Marcellus’ mind: the reason Galouch lived as a hermit was because he had seen it as his mission to preserve and safeguard Banuk Sorcery.

‘I see, your point,’ Marcellus replied.

‘I can’t stop you,’ Galouch said helplessly. ‘I love you too much Marcellus. You are my student, and you are my family. You are my greatest joy in the world. I do not wish for ill to befall you, but I accept your need to live a life outside of the confines of sorcery.’

‘Master,’ Marcellus bowed in respect. ‘Guide me!’